

## Patriarchy, Male Sexuality, Oedipal Conflict and Female Subject in K.S. Maniam's *The Cord*

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### Abstract

This paper is a feminist reading of K.S. Maniam's play *The Cord* using the psychoanalytical concepts of patriarchy, male sexuality and oedipal conflict. By reading *The Cord* against the traditional grain to examine the images of the women (female subject), the three female characters are seen to be active agents although the male characters overpower them in the play. Maniam, though hardly a feminist himself, portrays the three female characters rebelling against the patriarchal norms that restrict them and each takes a different approach to liberate herself from the oppression. For Lakshmi, death is the only way out of misery; for Leela, the struggle for independence still remains an inspiration; and Kali survives her exposure to male exploitation through her innovative self-sufficiency and strength. While the male's integrity and self-respect appear totally eroded by the experience of self-distrust and self-devaluation, the female's resilience enables her to regain command of her own fate.

### Introduction

Contemporary feminists have given considerable attention towards the concept of patriarchy in their re-reading of texts written by male and female writers. Radical feminists, such as Kate Millet and Gerda Lerner, define patriarchy as a system which oppresses women (Millet, 1970; Lerner, 1976). Marxist feminists like Heidi Hartmann, in contrast, use the term to denote the relations between women's subordinate position and the organization of capitalist modes of production (1982, pp. 1-41). Psychoanalytic feminists such as Juliet Mitchell, define patriarchy in another way to signify a society in which the male possesses either actual or symbolic power, with women treated as property and object of exchange (1974). While there have been problems with the definition of patriarchy and differences as to its causes, most feminist critics agree to a certain extent that patriarchy must be understood on its own terms without reducing it to a mere derivative of economic power or class society. Another point to be taken into consideration when theorizing patriarchy is that such theory should not insist on women's universal and shared oppression, rather, it should take into account the factors of class, race, age, sexuality, religion and language which differentiate the experiences of women from one another (Ramazanoglu, 1989). Walby (1990) argues that the theory of patriarchy is not static and patriarchal domination changes its forms according to its historical situation. She further argues that in Western societies there has been a general shift away from private patriarchy based on individual control within the household to a more public form based on structures outside the household. She stresses, however, that domination by men is experienced not only in the public worlds of politics and employment but also in the family and personal relationships.

Patriarchy or patriarchal relations, says Coward, can be variously understood as the oppression of women by men (sexism), as a particular kind of kinship structure where the male rules, or as a residual ideology of male dominance (1983, p. 270). In other words, patriarchy designates a problem, a contradiction between men and women, a gender division which implies power and unequal power relations. But to regard patriarchy as simply a form of power implying both the literal (physical) overpowering of women by men and the different institutional modes of domination (e.g. tradition, religion) perhaps does not do justice to the more diffuse workings of power in various social and sexual practices and in forms of speech. The notion of patriarchy, if handled with caution, might be productively thought of, as Coward suggests, in terms of the ways subjectivity, sexual divisions and the subordination of women are constructed in culture, through the more direct and the more diffuse, particularly discursive, workings of power (1983, p. 270). It is Coward's definition of patriarchy that will be used to read Maniam's *The Cord*.



### Traditional Reading of *The Cord*

*The Cord*, Maniam's first play to be staged (March, 1984), was the first that brought him to public attention, being a play written in English which, according to one theatre critic, "evaluate[s] the status quo of the Indian Malaysian community in Malaysia" (Moy, p. 1984). It was ten years later that this play was first published, in London by Skoob, and was thus made available to readers not only in England but also in Malaysia. The cast consists of eight characters, of whom three are females. The playwright does not specify the setting of the play, but judging by the characters he has chosen to portray, it reflects colonial and post-colonial Malaysia in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s where the conflicts of the present are addressed and prefigured in terms of those of the past.

Briefly, *The Cord* dramatizes the male protagonist's (Muniandy) struggle for self-awareness and revenge after he discovers the truth that his wife was raped by Muthiah, his superior at work. The playwright chooses to portray this in nineteen scenes of varying length which shift back and forth from the common space in front of the working-class squatter houses to the 'no-man's-land' through which men pass between work or town and home. The audience can deduce from the dialogue that Muniandy's wife, Lakshmi, dies shortly after giving birth to a son. When the play starts, Muniandy is living with his grown-up son Ratnam and his daughter-in-law, Leela. In the first four scenes of the play the audience sees that Muniandy is still living in the past, mourning for his wife but at the same time nurturing a family with Ratnam and Leela. As an industrious, honourable and subdued man who does not indulge in alcohol, Muniandy is the envy of the neighbours, who isolate him and mock his ways. Ratnam, on the other hand, is a drunkard, an irresponsible wife-beater, who without qualms relies on his father's income to support his wife and children while wasting his own earnings on liquor. Short of money, Ratnam resorts to conspiracy with Kali (a neighbour's wife) to trick Muniandy into giving his savings to him. When the plan fails, they provoke Muniandy into playing the ancient instrument, "uduku", to cure his fanatical devotion towards his dead wife.

During a trance induced by the "uduku" (acted in six brief scenes) Muniandy discovers the truth that his son Ratnam is actually the product of his wife's rape by his superior Muthiah, a man for whom he has very great respect and admiration. Traumatized by the revelation of the rape, Muniandy resorts to alcohol to drown his sorrows and is determined to use his son (but now his illegitimate son), Ratnam to humiliate and retaliate against Muthiah. Muniandy's action is driven more by his rage to get even with the man who has betrayed his trust rather than to avenge the violation of Lakshmi. Although Ratnam is unaware of the truth behind Muniandy's changed behaviour, he agrees to go against Muthiah, who is also his superior at work and who constantly shouts abuses at him and mistreats him with impunity. The play ends with Muniandy strangling Muthiah after he finally manages to force him to confess that he is the biological father of Ratnam. Muniandy has therefore restored the balance of justice for himself by taking the law into his own hands and taking the life of the rapist.

Critics of the traditional masculinist reading of *The Cord* have pointed that the overall theme of the play is that of men's struggle for self-respect and integrity in their adaptation to life in another country, where their own traditions and culture have been eroded by their post-colonial experience. As Moy (1984) points out in her review of *The Cord*, "Man, to Maniam, when displaced from his heart and his home, is an emotional refugee belonging neither here nor there". Most critics have had little to say about the female characters in the play, not even briefly mentioning their presence on stage, because *The Cord* is an elaborate justification for revenge; it is a drama in which the emotions of the male protagonist are placed centre stage and the life of the female victim who is violated is obscured because the playwright chooses to portray her only through brief flashback scenes. Anne James, who played Leela in the 1994 production of *The Cord*, feels that strong women characters in modern plays are mostly marginalized or outcast figures such as prostitutes (Nur Nina Zuhra, 1995, p. 94). She adds



that she would rather play Leela than the morally suspect Kali (Nur Nina Zuhra, 1995, p. 94). Lee (1986) reviewing *The Cord* for *The New Straits Times*, argues that "[the] playwright has a few comments to make on the changing consciousness of women in a transplanted community and he manages to weave them into the story, though somewhat gratuitously". My reading of this play will focus on the female characters, who have been neglected by most critics and partially ignored by the playwright, and my comments on the male characters are meant to provide a more thorough analysis of the gender relationships portrayed by the playwright.

### Cultural and Historical Background of *The Cord*

For a feminist reading of this play, it is important to investigate the parallel concepts that address the subjugation of working women in a male-dominated world: the role of class and history, and of patriarchal society. Maniam is determined to liberate his characters from the subjection of post-colonialism: he recognises the need to help raise oppressed working-class men to a level of human dignity and self-awareness and to shake them free of ignorance, backwardness and superstition. A feminist reading of Maniam's play attempts to decolonize patriarchy and free women from the restricting roles sanctioned by religion and tradition while keeping in mind the material constraints of their class condition.

A feminist analysis of Maniam's work also means an investigation of the class condition and historical context of women in the post-colonial Indian Malaysian setting. Hartsock's (1983) argument in *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* seems to illuminate the idea that male dominance is constructed along class and gender lines in this play: the former in the area of economics and the latter in the area of sexuality (2-4). At this point I would like to delineate briefly the historical context of the Indian immigrant workers in Malaysia to help us understand their working class predicament. Stenson (1980) discussing the historical situation of working-class Indians in the 1930s in *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia*, describes their circumstances at that time:

[...]The structure of Indian society in Malaya, especially in the plantation sector of the west coast, was determined by the structure and needs of the European sector of the colonial economy.[...]Recruited largely from the untouchable (or adi-dravida) castes of South Indian society, the Tamil and Telegu labourers were probably the most obedient, indeed, servile labourers then available in the colonial world.[...]Already familiar with British rule, they were prepared to accept the military-type discipline necessary to the success of a system of European plantation agriculture. Lacking a tradition of worker solidarity or co-operation, the South Indian labourers had relatively little capacity to bargain for higher wages and almost no capacity to desert the European plantations in favour of independent pioneering agriculture. They were ideally suited to a form of production that had been initiated with slave labour, and which could only survive on the basis of one form or another of bonded labour or in situations of high population density where there was no alternative. (16-17)

While the middle-class Indians who migrated to Malaya as traders and professionals moved upwards from their initial economic level and moved away from their 'Indian-ness', the working-class Indians remain at the same level. An English education, says Arasaratnam (1970), is one of the key factors that divides the middle-class from the working-class Indian. Descendants of the labourer groups are too poor to afford an English education and "cannot aspire to improve their status" (p. 194). As a result there is "little or no occupational mobility among these groups" (p. 194).



Concurrently, recent historical and sociological studies of the Hindu family structure and of working-class Indian women in Malaysia and Singapore have provided a background to the social subordination of their circumstances. Mehta (1990) in *Giving Up Hope: A Study of Attempted Suicide Amongst Indian Women*, argues that the subjugation of Indian women immigrants as an 'oppressed' gender group is not much different from that of other women throughout the world. They share certain areas of suffering as:

[...]battered wives, rape victims, prostitutes, and unwed mothers. Beyond these common areas are women's sufferings which are determined by socio-cultural factors. Some of these factors are the social status of women which mould their personalities, the economic dependence of the women, and lastly, the customs and religious beliefs which affect the way in which females perceive their problems and react to them. (p. 7)

But immigrant Indian women, Mehta (1990) adds, also lack "supportive networks", "confidence and courage in a new country", "knowledge of social services available" and have great "difficulty in breaking away from traditional attitudes and barriers" (p. 7). These traditional values, related to family, religion and marriage, which the women hold on to are the very factors that cause them the most stress. Those who are unable to cope with their stressful lives sometimes attempt suicide as a way out (p. 12). The main reasons for the attempted suicide among those women under forty, according to Mehta (1990) are:

firstly, stress of marriage, which is culturally considered to be the main goal of a woman's life; and secondly, the subordinate position of Indian women in relation to their male kin before and after marriage accentuates the adjustment stresses which they face in this stage of their lives. (98)

The extent of the oppression faced by the Indian women in Malaysia and Singapore is reflected in the findings of this study: the rate of suicides and attempted suicides is highest among Indian females. Oorjitham (1984) in her studies of working-class Indian women in "Indian Women in Urban Malaysia", finds that the basic value orientations of these women are still traditional:

They settle for arranged marriages, still accept the idea of male dominance, confine themselves to certain roles within the family, socialize their children towards a traditional model and generally place a whole lot of restrictions on themselves, with regard to wider interaction in society. [...]Not only will these women always remain dependent on their parents, husbands and sons, but they will further encourage their daughters to be so too, thereby creating a vicious circle.[...] Personal ambition and achievement developing from initiatives and self-confidence, must be sacrificed at the altar of submissiveness. (125)

In other words, the cultural and social attitudes and mores transplanted by male Indian immigrants to Indian women in their society are largely very restrictive and conservative. Patriarchy, articulated through the family and society, has brought the female to her present oppressed and subservient level. Oorjitham (1984), however, basing her argument on Promilla Kapur's work, claims that Indian women in Vedic times had absolute equality with men in the Hindu religion and society until 300 B.C.:

Women also held respectable positions both in the family and in society. A female child was welcomed and she was entitled to education, a voice in the selection of her life partner and considerable freedom of movement. Even though the families were joint in nature and monogamy was the rule, certain trends like widow remarriage and divorce were permitted. (116)



Oorjitham (1984) adds that the status of Indian women began to decline due to certain socio-cultural and political factors and particularly the literal interpretation of the Code of Manu, which reinforced patriarchal elements in Hindu doctrine and practice after 300 B.C:

Women's education was discontinued, their age at marriage was reduced and they were given no rights in the choice of their marital partners. Manu, the Hindu law-giver, formulated certain rules whereby a woman was to depend on her father in childhood, on her husband in her young age and on her sons in her old age. (116)

This deterioration continued until the 1800s, by which time the position of women had been subordinated in all spheres of life. The nineteenth century saw a gradual improvement among middle- and upper-class women due to "the efforts of social reformers and progressive religious leaders, who were themselves caught within forces of change in the societal, cultural, political and economic spheres" (Oorjitham, 1984, p. 116). As for the working-class Indian Malaysian women, says Oorjitham, the improvement in their lives has been extremely slow in comparison to the more prestigious classes. The fact that these women originate from the Tamil working class who migrated to Malaya during the British colonial rule to work in the rubber plantations means that their values and attitudes reflect those of the early Indian immigrants. Subsequent Indian generations in Malaysia, alienated from their motherland, have embraced the patriarchal values espoused by the early Indian immigrants and these values are also reflected in the characters in *The Cord* to a certain extent.

#### **Patriarchal Precedence, Male Sexuality, Oedipus Complex and Female Subject**

Although a combination of the 'resistant reader' and materialist feminist approaches can illuminate the role of women and the class struggle between the middle-class employer and the working-class labourers, the power relationships between the sexes in *The Cord* can best be shown through the interrelated discourses of patriarchy and sexuality. Patriarchy, in *The Cord*, alerts us to the way the subordination of women (Leela) is secured through literal male domination (Ratnam); and through the operation of a certain type of kinship structure, in which women (Leela and Kali) function as objects of exchange according to their productive capacities, and by which private property, male dominance and patrilineal descent are meant to be guaranteed. At the same time both male and female oppression are secured through institutional controls especially through the pervasive discourse of paternalism exemplified in Muthiah's dealings of the labourers (Ratnam) and through the inescapable silencing of the rape victim (Lakshmi) via suicide. In addition, the mechanism of Oedipal conflict is seen to be operating between the two men (Muthiah's contest with Muniandy, directed towards the same object of desire, Lakshmi) in the narrative of the play and its consequence ends in the violent death of Muthiah at the hand of Muniandy. When read in a combination of approaches, *The Cord* offers an illuminating dramatic representation of the ways in which power relations naturalize notions of patriarchy and sexuality in the production of social and sexual identity.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, some familiarity with Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex in the male child is necessary in order to understand his interpretation of male sexuality in relation to psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, the theory of the Oedipus complex relates to the child's desire to eliminate the father in favour of the mother as the first object of love. The male child perceives the father as a rival for the mother's love and attention, but he also fears the father, believing that he is likely to castrate him. This belief, according to Freud, originates from his seeing that his mother does not possess a penis; hence she has already been castrated. In his pre-Oedipal phase, the child relates to his mother as the sole love object but the fear of castration eventually leads him to renounce his desire for the mother and to identify himself with the father, who possesses the organ of authority and power, the phallus. This renunciation, which Freud terms as the resolution of the Oedipal struggle is, however temporary because the mother will be replaced by another female in his adult (post-Oedipal) life.



For Lacan, Freud's pre- and post-Oedipal stages become his Imaginary and Symbolic realms. The Imaginary belongs to the mother, and the infant exists with her there without language.<sup>3</sup> The child begins to leave this prelinguistic realm when he experiences the mirror phase, in which he sees himself for the first time as separate from the mother. Lacan's mirror phase indicates two important psychological conditions. First, the child realizes he has a penis and his mother does not. Second, he sees in the mirror a more perfect self, a kind of ego ideal. Believing that his mother has been castrated, and fearing that his father will castrate him for loving his mother, the child rejects the Imaginary and enters the Symbolic realm of language (also called the Law of the Father), in which the father rules. The moment of the child's recognition in the mirror phase occurs at the same time as his entry into language. The rejection of the mother (who lacks the phallus) results in the loss of the mother which the child achieves with his entry into language, leaving a trace of drive or desire which the male child goes on to resolve by repressing the drive or replacing the mother figure with another female in his adult life. The experience of lack, the sense that something is missing (of unfulfilled demand) is, in psychoanalytic terms, insatiable no matter how much is given to the subject in response to its demand. Desire, therefore, arises out of the subject's experience of lack or incompleteness because it seeks to replace lost (repressed) objects. In *The Cord*, Maniam's characters, especially the male ones, repeatedly experience the intense repressed desire which may drive them to disrupt the established social order and patterns of identity, and to refuse compromise as a result of their excess demand.

As the first scene opens, the audience is clearly given the setting of a gendered landscape of patriarchy: the dividing line between the male and the female sphere, the immuring door of the domestic dwelling, the constriction of female potential' and the construction of woman as a monolithic category. As Leela sits in front of the house in the late evening, waiting for her husband Ratnam, who comes home in a drunken state singing his song inspired by alcohol, she is the image of hopelessness and desperation as she looks on her irresponsible husband. Leela is positioned in the domestic setting, and the physical constraint of the squalid working-class squatter home is seen to be even more suffocating because of her constant awareness of the neighbours beyond the thin partition wall, who, hear and react to every event, shout or domestic squabble in their neighbours' household.

Yet this most compliant of women is also shown to be endowed with both voice and agency over a range of situations. Conscious of her 'lack', Leela is not a silent wife: she is seen constantly speaking out her mind with regard to her husband's drinking problem; confronting her husband when dealing with their financial problem, and expressing her anger at her husband when he does not provide for the family:

LEELA: You go and drink when we need the money to feed the children.

RATNAM: Ask the old man for more.

LEELA: Your father?

RATNAM: That old man!

LEELA: Squeeze the stone and it gives some water, but from him- nothing! You leave almost no money for the house. (28)<sup>4</sup>



Here Maniam gives a powerful indictment of male irresponsibility and abuse of power in the domestic setting, but his female character is not willing to collude with them. At the end of this scene the audience sees Ratnam inflicting physical abuse on Leela by striking her two "ruthless blows"(31). This scene calls attention to Ann Foreman's comments in *Femininity As Alienation* (1979):

Capitalism split society into two worlds - the world of business, industry and social interchange, and the world of the family. But the two are not symmetrical. Men strove to rule in the first, but failing that, were the victors in the second.[...]Family life provided the relief where, after the threats and assaults that social life made on a man's confidence, the woman confirmed his humanity and subjectivity. Away from the constant fight for survival in the competitive arena of social production his position at the centre of the family's world was guaranteed. (93)

Ratnam's physical violence against Leela can be read as his reassertion of male authority in the home to compensate for his lack of it outside the domestic realm. Patriarchal force manifested in the form of physical violence in the home is critiqued by the playwright in this play: men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief because these intimate relations are the very ones that are the core structures of their oppression. Leela also becomes fiercely resentful of the double standard by which she is expected to devote her whole life to childcare while her husband only participates occasionally in the life of the home. She is driven to despair by frustrated hopes and financial impotence as she says to Ratnam:

LEELA. You go away to work. You go away to the coffeeshop. But I stay here. I see the children's faces. Their tongues search for food even after they have eaten!"

RATNAM. Go back to your pots and pans! (29)

Here, again, Leela is assigned to the subordinate role as her activities are restricted to her children in the private sphere of the home as her access to the public sphere is denied. Although Leela is seen to be physically and emotionally defenceless and lacks financial power, from her vantage-point in the home she watches the crisis developing, the gradual estrangement between father and son. It is she who observes the contrasting characters of Muniandy and Ratnam as she lashes out at her husband: "You're just the opposite of your old man. You drink; he doesn't. You cast your eyes on every plump breast that passes by. He doesn't even lift his eyes to my face when he talks to me"(31). It is also Leela who realizes that Ratnam's alcohol addiction has destroyed his father's hope for a united family as she tries to make him change his ways: "You spoiled his dream of a family. Now you're spoiling our lives"(60). Leela also has a strong influence over Ratnam's father; she has what Ratnam calls the "magic"(29) to please Muniandy and lead him into giving her material needs such as jewelry, food, clothing and money to raise the children.

Leela's intense frustration with her financial powerlessness is also expressed on the gestural level:

LEELA: Nuisance! Nuisance!

RATNAM: You inside, give us some peace!

(Leela rushes out. There is an empty basin in her hand, which she throws before Ratnam.)

LEELA: There's your peace!

RATNAM: A woman should be less violent. A house should be quiet. (59)



When her husband comes home drunk one day she throws an empty basin at him to express her anger and complains about his irresponsibility toward the family. Leela is seen as transgressing beyond her prescribed role as a 'good' wife. While the other characters recognize her impotence and sympathize with it in varying degrees — Kali's remark to her, "A drunkard for a husband and a mad man for a father-in-law! Who wouldn't pity you?" (82); and Govindan's sympathy for her, "She's just a victim like any one of us. She's afraid that her husband and father-in-law might do something rash" (86) — Muniandy thinks she has courage, which Ratnam lacks. It is Leela too who tries to stop Muniandy from striking her husband as she shouts to her father-in-law: "Don't touch him!" to which Muniandy replies: "At least your wife is bold"(62). Muniandy notices the rising rebellion in Leela's behaviour and warns Ratnam in the last scene of the play: "Leela is a changed woman. She expects more responsibility in you"(92). This new Leela can be seen in Act Five:

KALI: Leela! Leela! What can you do now? You're victim to that man's lust.

LEELA: Doctors can sew up the womb now.

KALI: The old man throws his money on drinks.

LEELA: The body and the limbs that withstood the pain of birth can withstand the fatigue of ordinary work. I'm going to work, Kali. Ordinary, respectable work. I shall be victim neither to men nor to money.

(Lights dim. They exit.) (83-4)

Leela's social consciousness lies in her refusal to become a commodity for the male exchange of woman's procreative capacity within the patriarchal family: she plans to extricate herself from her oppressed condition by 'sewing up the womb'. Leela's position illustrates the way childbearing has made women vulnerable to male control and manipulation. By challenging the restrictions of the maternal role imposed on her, she has now become the master of her own destiny by choosing to have power over her own body and to work for financial independence.

The playwright projects the traditionally allocated spaces as more conducive to female fulfillment, which could be interpreted as evidence of continuing complicity with patriarchy. This can be seen in Maniam's juxtaposition of the female character Kali with Leela in Act Five, Scene Four. Unlike Leela, Kali is a more modern woman, who ventures out of the home to satisfy her material needs and is quite successful in acquiring some luxuries for herself in the form of jewelry, clothing, and household items. While Leela struggles to make ends meet, Kali has surplus income and is seen to be helping Leela with her household needs; while Leela is the mother of three children, Kali is married but childless; while Leela fills the traditional role of a house-bound wife and mother, Kali moves out to share part of the narrative focus. However, it is Kali who appears more nearly the victim of society and male aggression. Contrasted with Leela's traditional world, the space allocated to the more modern Kali seems visibly shrunk; the freedom that seemingly brings the female into new spaces and roles renders her more than ever a marginalized figure.



As Kali finds her way out of poverty, moving out of the traditionally hallowed domestic space, she is projected as a curiously disempowered figure. From the opening scene Kali is referred to as "a gossip" by Leela and later, on her initial appearance (Act Two, Scene One), is openly humiliated by Ratnam as "The queen of dirt"(35). In short she is a constant target of "spiteful gossip"(43) as a woman without moral values. Here Maniam seems to explore the theme of infidelity in marriage, but the unfaithful (or assumed to be unfaithful) wife could be seen as no more than a useful device for providing the male characters with something to worry about. Kali is also juxtaposed to Ratnam regarding the treatment they receive: Kali, who is suspected of prostituting herself for money, is treated as a social outcast by the others; Ratnam, who is a low achiever, is verbally and physically abused at work by his superior Muthiah and treated with scorn. But while Kali's humiliation is at a societal level, Ratnam's is only at a personal level. Both are denied self-respect and dignity; however, each deals differently with this humiliation. While Kali challenges the people who treat her poorly and remains as strong as ever, Ratnam resorts to alcohol to forget his degradation.

Kali's self-assured public presence and economic independence is indicative of her empowerment. She has in her the image of the goddess Kali, the female Hindu deity who possesses invincible martial ability and power, and is "wild, bloodthirsty, and particularly fierce." (Kinsley, 1985). In this sense, the goddess Kali:

violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not perform household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function - fighting in battle. As an independent warrior who can hold her own against any male on the battle-field, she reverses the normal role for females and therefore stands outside normal society. (p. 5)

Kali's sharp wits and fiery temper are known to the others in her community. However, her strength of character is equated with her ability to scheme and lead others to conspire against Muniandy. Kali's 'bad' behaviour is seen by Muniandy as the fault of her "fully deaf and half an idiot"(35) husband who lacks the ability to restrain his wife, letting "her go too much"(41). Here the audience sees a cuckold husband is to be blamed for failing to control his wife because a woman's subservience to her husband's will is the measure of his patriarchal authority and thus of his manliness. Leela, who is the embodiment of traditional values, mocks Kali for her modern ways, "What do you depend on? Flesh and money? / "You are drunk with men and gold" (82).

Despite the insults hurled at her, Kali maintains a strong front. In other words, Kali is not willing to bow to social rules that contradict her desires. Unlike Leela or Lakshmi, Kali flouts conventional morality because she has no use for it. She knows the terms by which society judges her actions, and at times she appears to accept them. But she is not interested in obtaining people's good opinion; she is after more substantial rewards, to gain which she will use any means. As she says, "there will be necklaces, bangles, ear-rings, bracelets on my flesh. That gold will give my person value"(83) and prides herself on being a "woman of the world"(86). Kali even mocks at Muniandy for touching her: "You touched me! That's enough. The dirt will cling to your hand for years to come"(41). Kali even challenges Muniandy into playing the "uduku" to find out the truth about the "evil" in her house(41). It is her chance to clarify her innocence against the illicit accusations hurled at her. In Act Six, just before the end of the play, the audience sees a strong-headed Kali who threatens to leave her husband Chevudon for accusing her of infidelity(85). Kali remains steadfast in her declaration of innocence and blames Muniandy and Ratnam for causing trouble between them. She manages to convince Govindan and Chevudon that these two men have created havoc at work and also in the village by telling lies about her and Muthiah. This scene ends with a fist fight between the four men.



Lakshmi, Muniandy's wife, appears to have been both economically and spiritually dependent on her husband. The audience does not encounter Lakshmi until Act Three, Scene One (49) in the flashback/trance sequence (acted by Kali), prior to her death. Just like Leela, Lakshmi is seen to be relegated to the domestic sphere. However, Maniam has specified in the stage directions details such as her dress (she wears a head-cover) and gestures (she serves Muniandy a drink in the Indian way to show respect to her husband) to signify that Lakshmi is even more subservient than Leela (50). She has never raised her voice against her husband or even complained when he is at work most of the time, leaving her alone at home. She prays and wears the "pottu" on her forehead to signify that she is a married woman and, according to Muniandy, only death will erase the sign (40). Her traditional values are further confirmed in her uneasiness and reluctance to converse with her male neighbours in the absence of her husband. In fact, Lakshmi has managed to ward off Govindan's and Muthiah's advances while she is alone at home. She is pictured as a passive, chaste and obedient wife who guards her honour and virtue, and has accepted the values of a wife's inferiority and subordination to her husband. Hence, she is portrayed in the image of the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi, who represents the model Hindu wife:

she exemplifies the orderliness of human society and human relations.[...]She is typically shown as subservient to [her divine consort]Vishnu. [...]Reflecting her increasing association with social order, several texts locate Lakshmi's presence in righteous behaviour, orderly conduct, and correct social observance. [...]In association with Vishnu, Lakshmi provides a picture of marital contentment, domestic order, and satisfying co-operation and beneficial interdependence between male and female. (Kinsley, 1985, pp. 63-65)

The flashback scenes show past incidents from the time when Lakshmi first arrived in the new land with her husband (these occur within a period of three months to one year). In Act Three, from Scene Two to Scene Five, Maniam is establishing the fact that Lakshmi gradually becomes estranged from her husband, who is a workaholic, at the same time portraying the Oedipal conflict of Govindan and Muthiah, who contest with each other for Lakshmi, the object of their desire. Lakshmi is shown as a vulnerable woman, all alone most nights, lighting the "tier-lamp" and waiting for her husband to come home. She kneels and prays while Muniandy works overtime to earn more money for the family. Govindan and Muthiah both notice the lonely wife and try to seduce her. Eventually Muthiah, being a more privileged male than Govindan in terms of class, manages to win Lakshmi's trust. Under the guise of a caring and friendly superior who looks after his workers' welfare, Muthiah gains access to Lakshmi's home in the absence of her husband. He seizes the opportunity to get closer to Lakshmi and tries to seduce her. When Lakshmi refuses him, he rapes her in her own home. In Act Three, Scene Five the audience witnesses the symbolic rape scene: Muthiah and Lakshmi move in choreographed steps:

MUTHIAH. Let me take water from that pot.

KALI/LAKSHMI. Straight from the hips?

MUTHIAH. And with my bare hands!

KALI/LAKSHMI. No! No! Alone! I'm alone.

MUTHIAH. No one will know.

*(The stylized rape begins. Kali/Lakshmi moves, but Muthiah pursues. They close.)*

KALI/LAKSHMI. Like a brother he was. Back! Back!

*(They struggle. The toppee falls. The baton lies at Kali/Lakshmi's feet.)*

The pot is broken! The water runs!

*(Muthiah leaves. Kali/Lakshmi lies still for a while, then getting up puts out the lamp.)*

(55)



This scene indicates that, even in the space allocated to her in the household, a woman is still vulnerable to violent threats posed by men like Muthiah. As a woman, Lakshmi abides by the rule of the Father, the feminine code of behaviour, but it is her passivity that has provoked Muthiah's rampant male urge for possession. The analogy of the 'broken pot' connotes another meaning in the Indian culture; Malladi Subbamma in *Women: Tradition and Culture* (1985) illuminates the analogy: "in the case of adultery, the society calls the woman depraved and downfallen. She is compared to a broken pot. But the same attitude is not shown towards a man. He is unblemished.[...] Here is the greatest inequality. Here is the greatest injustice to women" (Subbamma 32). Although taken by force, Lakshmi is no longer the ideal chaste wife; she is now the "broken pot", tarnished and flawed.

Earlier in the play the audience is informed that Lakshmi has suddenly died a few days after giving birth to a son. In Act Two, Scene Two Kali reveals that Lakshmi has ended her life suddenly, suggesting that Lakshmi has, without being accused, condemned herself by suicide. The critic, Kit Lee, comments that Lakshmi can be called either "a victim of rape or marital neglect or a social conditioning that disallows honesty: she could have reported the rape and had Muthiah arrested, or she could have simply given vent to her sexual frustration, but she did neither" (138). It can be argued that Lakshmi's situation is more complex than is implied by this explanation. In a society where woman is seen as a means of guaranteeing family property and honour, especially that of chastity, where she is seen in terms of her function as a wife and mother, not as a human being with needs and desires of her own, there is no way for her to avoid shame and humiliation but through suicide. Lakshmi's self-condemnation and self-punishment gives resonance to the reinforcement of patriarchal values informing the narrative. Her death is necessary in a male narrative because she poses a threat to the patriarchal order. Lakshmi is dead even before the play starts, and is only brought on stage in a flashback, played by the actor who plays Kali, signifying that her life is partially obscured and of little importance.

In considering the character Muniandy, I wish to employ the notion of 'lack' to signify his Oedipal fixation for his dead wife/mother in *Leela*.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned earlier in my introduction, desire is the residue or remainder of an unfulfilled wish; it is insatiable, and primarily repressed wishes reappear in and as unconscious desire in a subject's life. Muniandy is unable to come to terms with the sudden loss of his wife through suicide, and to compensate for the loss or lack of a wife/mother, he turns to *Leela* as a surrogate mother, as is revealed in his speech:

My feelings return to the time I was held by my mother, later by my wife and I wanted to be touched that way, by warm human hands. (76)

*Leela* provides an imaginary resolution to his perceived lack, and symbolizes the family that he desires. For in *Leela* he finds both the realization of the dream and a warm, spiritual mother-figure who, unlike his son Ratnam, understands the dreamer's excessive demands. Muniandy's trust in the Imaginary mother is paralleled by his hostility towards another woman, Kali, whose behaviour and attitudes negate his ideal images of the faithful wife and mother. He resents Kali because although she too is a reminder of his lost mother, she incites his lack, and her betrayal is the lens through which her motivations are refracted. Kali thus reminds him both of his mother and of his desire, which is repressed through aggressive word-play and the classifying of Kali as a whore, the antithesis of his imaginary ideal.



Rejected by Leela ("It was torture for me. I have to behave like your mother. 'She wore the sari without crumpling its fold,' your father says. It's like the sackcloth of death on me." (29)) and isolated from his comrades, Muniandy seeks refuge for his frustrations at his wife's grave and seeks solace in the temple. His unresolved complex is revealed in his recounting of a peculiar recurrent dream:

The reasons never came. The vomit came, the urine came, the filth came. Streams of abuse, scorn, insult, kicks, and spit came.

The laughter followed me everywhere. Even from that deep drunkenness I heard the voices. (61)

Here, Leela's refusal to satisfy Muniandy's desire for a mother-figure produces images of uncertainty, recurring chaotic dreams, because his desire is beyond conscious articulation, for it is blocked, repressed and incapable of expression. In addition, Ratnam's contrasting behaviour and inability to treat him like a father also remains a mystery to him. The unsolved riddles are finally answered through the trance which illuminates past events: Ratnam is not his son after all, he is the product of his wife's rape by Muthiah. The revelation of the protagonist's buried past releases feelings of anger, betrayal, and a desire for vengeance against the exploiter to reclaim the lost mother-figure, Lakshmi.

Muniandy blames Lakshmi for the rape by saying: "the dead guards my money though she didn't guard her honor"(92). The first thing that he does after discovering his wife's rape is to get rid of all the pictures of her, expressing his feelings of anger, disgust and resentment of his betrayal by his wife and boss. The wife that he has worshipped all these years turns out to be dishonourable. His devotion to her turns into "pain", "insults" and "the loss of a future - everything" (61). He stops giving financial support to Leela and her children and reveals his anxiety about paternity, a problem which haunts him after the revelation of the rape. With mixed feelings of total rage and uncertainty, he repeatedly reasserts that he is the father of Ratnam and asks him to confirm his fatherhood: "Are you my son? Say it" (63) and retorts to Leela "Is she my daughter-in-law? My son doesn't even call me 'Father'..." (61). To which Leela firmly answers: "If you're a father, you'll know what it means to starve" (63); for without his support Leela and her children will not be able to survive.

Earlier in the play, Muniandy is seen to disapprove of Ratnam's desire to own a motorcycle. Ratnam is a stereotype of a plantation worker who is exploited by the owner and does not even earn enough to support his wife and children. He has no hope of upward mobility and in order to forget his frustrations he drowns himself in alcohol. Trapped in a limbo of values, Ratnam dreams of owning a motorcycle, a symbol of status in modern society, but he has no means of owning one except through his father:

RATNAM. I just need a bit more money for food and clothes and a motorcycle.

MUNIANDY. A motorcycle?

RATNAM. A Yamaha.

MUNIANDY. What's that?

RATNAM. Where do you keep your eyes and ears? That's a Japanese machine. Everyone's riding it these days.

MUNIANDY. In our days we controlled our desires.

RATNAM. We've nowhere to hide. I can't hide, like you do, in the cemetery and the temple. The world has become crowded. We see each other many times in the day. That man, Muthiah, insults me every time he sees me. (32-33)



Here, the audience is able to judge Ratnam's values: he has rejected traditional submissiveness and replaced it with modernity. Ratnam tries to overcome his financial powerlessness and impotence by choosing the easy way out: he begs for financial help from his father and is flatly refused. But later, in his desperation to get even with Muthiah, Muniandy involves Ratnam in his scheme of revenge by promising to reward him with the motorcycle and by invoking the father-son relationship in Act Five, Scene Two. This proves to be futile because his real motive is revealed when he urges Ratnam to beat Muthiah: "We all hate him [Muthiah] because he's powerful....We must rob him of his power./Then beat him in this very place. Let me watch him take his punishment like a man"(73-74). Here the paternalistic benevolence of the older character masks his actual dominance over the younger man. Blinded by his material lust for the motorcycle and Muniandy's disguised intention, Ratnam agrees to act as he is told. In the final scene the audience sees Muniandy's transformed character: full of rage, impotence, and a desire to revenge his years of humiliation and betrayal, Muniandy turns to violence. The hatred which has been suppressed in Muniandy can no longer be controlled. The desire for revenge has ultimately turned into a nightmare that destroys not only the hated, but also the hater. His desire, as unconscious, cares little for social approval; it is concerned only with its own unfulfilled demand, its internal logic, which betrays the socially appropriate law.<sup>6</sup>

The villain character Muthiah may be read as the playwright's critique of male dominance along class lines in the area of economics and along gender lines in the area of sexuality, as I have mentioned earlier. Muthiah, who is well-known for his position of authority in the Indian community, possesses qualities of aggressiveness, pride, and altruism. It is these qualities that bring about his career advancement in the colonial plantation as described by the workers Govindan and Chevudon:

GOVINDAN. Learned the ways of the white man. Tail down when the shiny car comes.

CHEVUDON. Worked hard. Promoted.

GOVINDAN. Learned all the tricks. Kowtowed. Comes now. Greet him for our pay. Cuts pay to keep us quiet. White boss satisfied.

*(Muthiah is wearing the type of tropical toppee white managers were fond of. He has trousers on and a thin, leather belt. He wields a shiny baton.)* (53)

However, it is also these qualities that bring about his downfall. Muthiah has learned from his master how to work the system to his advantage. As an administrator he is strict with his subordinates and demands obedience, diligence and punctuality from them. He is English-educated and colonial-trained and whose exercise of power is attended by isolation, decadence and depression. "The white man went long ago, but he left his representative behind" comments Sulaiman, referring to Muthiah, his superior at work who is strict and incapable of compromise (56). He adds, "Anger is like pride to him"(63), and "He has a mind that sees everything. He puts everyone down"(65). Muniandy describes him as a power-crazed individual as he lashes out at him in the final scene before strangling him: "Are you sure you're not mad with power?" To which Muthiah replies arrogantly "I'm doing a job"(89). He looks down on the labourers with contempt:

You're all the same. You want to be ruled. Either by the stick or some other object or system. You don't want to face your uncertainties. You want to be taught conduct, some discipline so that you can live within the narrow compound of personal satisfactions. (77)



Muthiah's abusive, aggressive behaviour has also led him into moral degradation: raping Lakshmi, humiliating Ratnam, and having an illicit relationship with Kali. Muthiah's final speech sums up his immoral behaviour:

There was emptiness. I looked around and saw I had sacrificed the human touch. No one wanted to reach out to me. I had become a machine of power. There was terrible loneliness inside...and I took again. (94)

Muthiah exercises his hostility and domination against helpless people. He is detached from the claims of family, tradition and religion, and his only guide to conduct seems to be of self-interest. Muthiah has no compunction in exploiting the poor workers and their wives because to him ties of family, of religion and of tradition are meaningless. Muthiah is not deterred by the fact that the women he is attracted to are legally or morally committed to other men: Lakshmi is married to Muniandy and Kali to Chevudon. "You take wives away from husbands!" rages Ratnam at Muthiah, who answers arrogantly "I take when I can! It's none of your business"(78). In short, Muthiah is the embodiment of the departed colonial power and the forces of modernization that corrupt morality of its servants. The values of materialism and individual self-interest have invaded his spiritual self and have caused his moral destruction. Here patriarchy in the form of force and aggression, seeks to intimidate its subordinates.

Read in the language of psychoanalysis, Muthiah stands for the symbol of the father figure; he is the embodiment of Law and generator of meaning in the social order. His discourses are the 'truth' of patriarchal society, though he himself is not the source or origin of such discourses, for 'truth' is located not in the creative mind but in the language which defines it; that is, in the play of differences by which meaning is constructed. In *The Cord* it is the basic division between the ruler and the ruled, which underwrites the establishment of other social and sexual differences, and which is the enabling condition of the power of the oppressor over the oppressed. Muthiah exercises power because of the way his discourse is privileged in a divided society, and because he literally sees what others do not; the various knowledge derived from his colonial education allows him to dominate different arenas of struggle and constitutes the prerequisite for the construction of the 'truth.' In the pursuit of power to establish a 'regime of truth', Muthiah attempts to nail down meaning through his ideological discourses by using an elaborate battery of discursive, institutional and physical controls, as seen here:

MUTHIAH. Your father has caught the laziness disease from you. (*intoned in false English tones*) Like son like father. My god, what's going to happen to people like you?

RATNAM. (*also in false-toned English*) A is for Ape. B is for Bastard, C is for ...

MUTHIAH. What are saying? Speaking English?

RATNAM. The language you tried to teach me so many years ago. The language you still think is full of pride. The language that makes you a stiff, white corpse like this!

MUTHIAH. But you're nothing. I'm still boss here.

RATNAM. You try so hard. Like you tried to teach me that language. Everything happens naturally. Now the language is spoke like I can speak it. (*He goes into pidgin English.*) 'You want to go 'jamban' not 'Could you show me the bathroom, please!' You can talk to me in the language we all know. I can speak real-life English now. (64)



Ratnam rejects Muthiah's authority which is imposed on him through the use of the colonial language and abusive remarks. Both Ratnam and Muthiah come into conflict at the level of definitions of the 'normal' and of 'truth'; both will struggle over meanings from strong positions; but, given the way their society privileges the 'truths' of middle-class discourse, it is Ratnam who has little or no power, who is unable to make his definitions of 'truth' prevail. Ratnam cannot dominate the scene of the conflict in terms of the available discourses because, being from a marginalized group, his language belongs to the discourse of the unspeakable which goes unheard. This scene ends with Ratnam's attack against the lack in Muthiah: "You wifeless, childless man. I'll make you choke on your own words one day!" (65) In reading Muthiah's behaviour with women, it is worth employing once more the notion of lack, in psychoanalytical terms, under the rubric of castration, implying not only literal amputation but also division, negativity, and the threat to male potency as well as the loss of totality and ideals. Castration also denotes a complex to be overcome. In Muthiah, there seem to be signs of such a complex. Regarding his experience of family life, Muniandy's working-class married life is the closest to him in his early days working at the British colonial plantation. Here, his position as voyeur of the familial and cultural plenitude of the married couple makes him aware of his own lack and envious at seeing the fruit of privilege (since married life and concomitant sexual satisfaction is the norm) on display: the female body of Lakshmi, his object of sexual desire. Already knowledgeable in the colonist's language, Muthiah allows his aggression at work to become an outlet for his frustration and sense of lack.

Muthiah's escape into work has made him financially independent and has upgraded his status from the working class to the middle class. However, Muthiah is still not able to overcome his Oedipal desire to possess the absent mother/wife and tries to seek reassurance and refuge in the figure of Lakshmi, at whom his repressed desire is directed. Being a man who does not believe in marriage and family values, Muthiah defends himself by claiming that it is this alienation that causes his transgression: "It's in loneliness illusions are made" and "You only needed aggression and you took anything you wanted. The more I look the more I wanted to take" (93). In other words, Muthiah's repressed desire for the absent mother/wife has turned into a desire to let his psychotic self loose and break the Oedipal Law by 'taking' women as he pleases. In his earlier attempt to be close to a woman, Lakshmi, he is rejected and this poses a threat to his male potency as well as a reminder of his fear of castration; he therefore rapes Lakshmi to reclaim his masculinity. But repressed desire, according to psychoanalysis, is never satisfied and is destined to repeat itself at another level, and this explains why he preys on Kali also to fulfill his lack.



### Conclusion

By reading *The Cord* against the hegemonic grain using the idea of the resistant reader to examine the images of the women, the three female characters are seen to have sufficient characterization and participate in enough actions to be seen as active agents although the male characters overpower them in the play. Maniam, though hardly a feminist himself, seems to be sympathetic to feminist thinking in this play. All the three female characters are seen to rebel against the patriarchal norms that circumscribe them and each takes a different approach to liberate herself from the oppression: for Lakshmi, death is the only way out of misery; for Leela, the struggle for independence still remains an inspiration; and Kali survives her exposure to male exploitation through her innovative self-sufficiency and strength. Kali's name is a deliberate reference to the goddess Kali; she is a female figure who shows a self-sufficiency, a resilience which none of the male figures seems capable of. The female's resilience enables her to regain command of her own fate. Fetterley (1978) in *The Resisting Reader* says,

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change.[...]It must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden. Feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness.

The males, whether the aloof Muniandy, the authoritative Muthiah, or the drunken dreamer Ratnam, appear rootless and ineffectual, emasculated by the corrosive experience of post-colonialism. While the male's integrity and self-respect appear totally eroded by the experience of displacement and the post-colonial legacies of self-distrust and self-devaluation. As for the overlapping Oedipal struggles of *The Cord*, they are brought to a provisional conclusion with Muniandy claiming the mother-figure after the disposal of the father-figure Muthiah. The killing is premeditated, motivated by Muniandy's love for Lakshmi and revenge on the exploiter. As for Ratnam, the killing of Muthiah is the removal of the patriarch, the middle-class oppressor. In this instance parricide, in its different forms, is accompanied by a further stage in what is the basic function, as has been argued by Freud, of the Oedipal fantasy: the process of maturation, the coming of age of the individual subject in the social order.



Muniandy's speech at the end of the play implies the recognition of his predicament and his rationalization for the killing:

Look at this thundu.

(As Muniandy talks he drags Muthiah slowly towards him.)

We'll be held together by this, the simple cord of humanity, as we enter that something bigger than our loneliness, bigger than our dignity, bigger than our power, bigger than all the machines we can build, bigger...bigger...bigger.... (94)

In a curious reversal, Muniandy seems to go beyond the dichotomy of victim and oppressor to something greater ("bigger than our loneliness, bigger than our dignity, bigger than our power[...]"). The blame for Muthiah's actions is thus apparently shifted to the plane of predatory capitalism, of which, it seems, everyone is an instrument. The 'simple cord of humanity' represents the Oedipal Law that should be heeded and maintained in patriarchal society.

#### Endnotes

1. With regard to the literary application of the notions of patriarchy and sexuality, I have found valuable help in Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*; Maud Ellmann, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*; Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson*.
2. For a feminist summary of Freud's theory of sexuality see Elizabeth Grosz, 'Sexuality and the Symbolic Order' in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, 50-81; Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*.
3. See Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Ego and the Imaginary' in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, pp.24-49; and Michael Payne 'The Mirror Stage' in *Reading Theory: An Introduction to Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva*, pp. 26-34, for a summary of Lacan's subject formation.
4. This page number and all the subsequent page numbers for Maniam's text refer to 'The Cord' in K.S. Maniam, *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and the Plays*.
5. According to Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, "love is never merely a relationship between two people, but always a contest between three, even if the third is present only as a psychic obstacle. Because of this triangular enmeshment, sexual identity is torn between the impulses to identify, desire, or compete with both maternal and paternal prototypes." See Maud Ellmann, p.13. For an account of the phases of libido development, including the Oedipal, see *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, chaps. iv and v, and XXIII, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, chaps. iii and vii. See also Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud in *Ecrits. A Selection*, and in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.
6. According to Grosz's reading of the concept of desire, it "is concerned only with its own processes, pleasures, and internal logic, a logic of the signifier. While such a logic can support social laws and values, it is also able to subvert or betray them, based as it is on expelled, socially inappropriate, repressed wishes." See Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, p.65.



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